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A Paper Trail for Voters

Ever since the voting trauma in Florida three years ago, election officials have been trying to find a better way to cast and count ballots. As progress is beginning to be made, it is critical that the new strategies do not create as many problems as they solve.

With the help of $3.9 billion in federal funds set aside to improve elections, states have begun the move to electronic voting machines. The new A.T.M.-style machines are easier for most people to use and undeniably faster. But recent glitches in Virginia and Florida have revived questions about how to recount a computerized vote after a close or suspicious election. New machines can already print a total of all votes cast, but that is simply a reflection of the computerized tally. What is needed is a paper record of each voter's choices that the voter can verify.

The most reasonable answer is to require that the machines be equipped with printers that will produce what Representative Rush Holt, Democrat of New Jersey, calls a "parallel paper record" of the vote. That makes sense to us. Like deeds, diplomas and other vital public documents, the nation's votes still need to be preserved somewhere on paper.

This view has drawn a lot of criticism, particularly from companies that make electronic voting machines. They say that adding a paper trail will cost more and that the printers will complicate the maintenance of the machines. Mainly, however, the machines' supporters say no fail-safe system is necessary because the machines are extremely secure.

Companies like Diebold Election Systems, which is one of the largest manufacturers of computerized voting machines, have not done their case much good by getting involved in politics. Walden O'Dell, the chief executive of Diebold Inc., is an ardent Republican fund-raiser who has committed to "helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes" to President Bush in next year's election. Such comments naturally fuel concern, especially among Democrats who note that Ohio is an important swing state in presidential elections and that machines from Mr. O'Dell's operation are among those being considered as new voting technology across the country.

Even without conspiracy theories, however, election experts from both parties worry that all these A.T.M.-style voting machines are not adequately protected against an advanced computer geek aiming to scramble the votes or a political hack turned political hacker.

California last month took the lead in demanding a backup paper tally of the vote when Secretary of State Kevin Shelley ordered that by July 2006, all electronic screen voting machines must have a "voter verified paper audit trail." Since California is expected to spend about $400 million on its new machines, the big voting machine companies are scrambling to make the paper options available and workable.

California's push also may make it easier for other states that are still circling the voting machine issue. New York is way behind, as Albany's politicians prefer to direct their attention to the more pleasant

question of who gets the big new contracts for voting equipment. But New Yorkers — especially New York City voters — need the assurance that their votes are available on paper for the recounting. Too many elections teeter on a few hundred votes, and candidates rightly expect human beings to be able to double-check the results. America's election apparatus needs to move firmly and quickly into the computer age. But the public must feel secure that each vote is really counted. At this stage, a voter-verified paper trail offers the public that necessary security .